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ABSTRACT

A philosophical discussion of the ethical issues involved in the interaction process between athletic coaches and sports officials concludes that, although there are several levels of "fair play" involved in any given contest, the greatest public support should be given to coaches of high integrity and moral character. (LH)

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Doing Right by Sport: The Treatment of Sport Officials and Referees

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Introduction

I would like to outline two general ethical approaches which could be used by coaches in their interactions with officials, referees and umpires in athletic contests. Both approaches are morally upright, but only one merits the acclaim of being outstanding, noble, fully praiseworthy. I can honestly support both ways of dealing with officials from a moral point of view. Were even the lesser of the two ethical orientations adopted by all, the sporting world in general, and relationships between coaches and officials in particular, would exhibit greater decency than they now do. But I can also see the moral superiority of the more taxing ethic, the finer way of treating sport officials.[1] In this paper, such is presented as an ideal.

Hartmann's Ethics

The attempt to show "higher" and "lower" orientations which are both moral may prove to be a difficult task, particularly now when many feel that it is virtually impossible to show even what is moral and immoral, let alone different degrees of excellence within morally right behavior itself.

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[1]The term, "officials," will be used from this point on in the paper in place of the more lengthy "officials, referees, umpires, and etc."

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For assistance in this part of the project, I will refer to the work of Nicolai Hartmann, an early 20th century ethicist. Hartmann came from a philosophic orientation often identified as "realism." In general, realists believe that ideas, as well as the physical world, are directly accessible to clear-thinking, clear-reflecting human beings. All elements of the physical and idea world, thought some realists, have their own characteristics or natures which can be described, catalogued and thus, preserved (as descriptions) for humanity.

The realists were the optimists among the philosophers, those who felt that their work could truly help people to understand the nature and value of life. Hartmann, perhaps the greatest optimist of all, believed that values are real and moreover, that similar values could be uncovered by scholars working at different times, in different cultures and independently from one another. Disagreement about values would be a reflection of the state of research and not necessarily an indication that no truth exists in this area. Just as confusion and contradictory hypotheses have been present and continue to characterize progress in scientific research, disagreement will be found in portions of scholarly work on ethics until clear vision can be gaired. At present, some values, according to Hartmann, can be seen clearly, others dimly, and still others not at all.

Hartmann believed that he could distinguish among three elements of moral values which he identified as height, strength, and ethos.[2] Height,

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[2]Hartmann dealt at some length with these elements in Volume II of his Ethics. It is widely felt that Hartmann made his most significant contribution to the study of ethics in this middle volume of the three part work.

For a short summary of these three elements, see Cadwallader, "Value Trichotomizing in Philosophy and Psychology: On Nicolai Hartmann and Karen Horney," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, XXXIX (December, 1978), No. 2, pp. 219-26.

the element which is of the greatest concern for this paper, is a quality of moral behavior which serves to rank different moral orientations in degrees of excellence. Hartmann felt that there is a single fixed ranking, based upon the "nature of the values concerned." (3:62) Though all parts of this ranking cannot at present be seen, (and finer distinctions may never be known,) more pronounced points on the scale of moral excellence can be identified.

Height depicts a degree of moral sensitivity which goes beyond "minimal obligation." High moral acts merit praise, where holding to lower values normally does not. Height in value is an optimum, a possibility, a finely-tuned unwavering sensitivity to the rights and feelings of others. Individuals, even people of good will, see high acts as optional, unusual, not required by the tenets of justice or decency. Height points in a direction of moral excellence which surpasses the care which even "good and fair" people show to one another. Hartmann wrote in this regard, "A sin against the lower values is blameworthy, is dishonourable, excites indignation, but their fulfillment reaches only the level of propriety, without rising higher. The violation, on the other hand, of the higher values has indeed the character of a moral defect, but has nothing degrading in it, while the realization of these values can have something exalting in it, something liberating, indeed inspiring." (3:53)

Strength is a second characteristic of moral values and tends to lie in an inverse relationship to height.[3] The greater the strength of the moral posture, the less its height will tend to be. For instance, the

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[3]Hartmann was careful to point out that this relationship, while often evident, is not one of a priori necessity. See p. 53.

directive--"Thou shalt not kill"--has considerable strength (people are compelled to follow it; failure to do so leaves persons morally destitute, condemned), while at the same time it has little height (refraining from murder does not normally distinguish people morally). Strength then, is a requirement of adherence, a feeling that others must be treated in certain just ways.

The question for this paper then becomes: What is the higher moral orientation toward officials? How do coaches, who exhibit moral height, act toward those who are charged with preserving the fairness of sport contests?

Some help in answering these questions comes from Hartmann's third characteristic of moral value, that of ethos.[4] He felt that values can be grouped in terms of three historical periods: 1) the Classical Period, with justice as the prime value and wisdom, moderation, self-control and courage as others; 2) the Christian Era, including the prime value of brother-love in addition to truthfulness, trustworthiness, trust, faith and humility; and 3) the Post-Christian Period, with independence (love of the remote), strength, vitality and the pursuit of excellence as major moral values.[5] While it is possible that some values from different ages could occupy the same precise point on the scale of moral height (for instance, courage from the Classical Period might have the same height as humility

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[4]See Ethics, Volume II, pp. 225-381.

[5]Hartmann would probably be classified today as a "rule deontologist." Moral good is not created in the extent to which non-moral good is brought into existence, as it is with the utilitarians (teleologists). Rather, moral good is attached to the human act itself--the loving, caring, trusting, and so on. To be sure, non-moral good (e.g. pleasure) is brought into existence through morally right acts, but the former does not "produce" morally correct behavior.

from the Christian Era), it was also clear to Hartmann that many did not. Hartmann believed, for example, that brother-love was a higher value than justice, though both are morally good. Inasmuch as this is largely my own position too, I will defer arguments defending this view to a later portion of the paper.

Morally Right Treatment of Officials: Approach #1

Some years ago now, a group called "The French Committee for Fair Play" concluded that a spirit of "collaboration" should exist from players and coaches toward officials. The term "collaborate," of course, comes from the Latin "com" plus "laborare," meaning to work with. This seems to imply that some sort of active joining of forces is to take place. Officials, according to the recommendations of the French Committee, are (in some sense) to be assisted in their efforts to provide a fair game.

But this notion of "collaboration" is still vague. Coaches know that assistance provided to officials can run from a minimal, infrequent, begrudging help to maximal, frequently present, magnanimous support. Thus, the exact force of the French Committee's recommendation remains unclear.[6]

In one sense, all athletes and coaches should (even must) collaborate with officials. The results of games are not valid unless the rules for them are followed. Whether it be only one side or both that step beyond the rules, games under such conditions are no longer intact. Persons may claim to be winners in these false contests, but the basis for contesting

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[6]In fairness to the work of this group, at least a couple of levels of moral obligations were identified. Yet their ethical foundations were not uncovered, and no argument was given for the superiority of one over another.

(the equal limitation of opportunity) is not present. Thus, if true outcomes of the games supposedly being played are desired, it makes sense to keep the rules and abide by officials' decisions.

But preserving the integrity of the game is not a moral reason for obeying officials. The morally right aspects of collaboration must lie on a foundation of respect and concern for officials themselves.

Let me examine one level of "respect and concern," review its moral foundations and then describe the behavior which would exemplify this level of morality. Values mentioned here will occupy relatively lower levels on Hartmann's criterion of height.

Suppose that coaches have a moral obligation to collaborate with officials in just ways. Justice, in other words, "demands" that certain sorts of considerations are given to officials.

Officials, it must be noted, gain various compensations for energy spent in the course of their duties. Most are paid; many find the task enjoyable as a self-testing challenge; others receive pleasure in helping the youngsters involved in the game; some probably like the excitement of making judgements in pressure-packed situations. Whatever, there are an assortment of benefits gained by officials through their officiating activities.

But it is also clear that these "goods" which are "taken in" by officials compensate for an equally broad assortment of expenditures--time and energy spent, pressures and inconveniences endured and even expenses incurred in the course of duty. In light of this, it would be unjust were coaches to upset this balance of benefits and obligations by not collaborating with officials in reasonable ways. Would it be right,

fair or just to make other human beings' tasks even more difficult that they already are, given the extent of compensation gained by them?

Justice would "rebel" against the following attitude which, even if it is not believed by many coaches, seems to guide the action of some. "Officials get paid and have to expect to take a certain amount of grief. If they don't do their jobs right, they deserve abuse. I count and my team counts; and my job is to worry about us."

Where is the sensitivity to justice here? Does the payment of officials (and this is generally a negligible sum, at that) render any sort of neglect or abuse fair or just?

I would like to list some ways of behaving toward officials which in many cases should meet the criterion of justice. But it must be kept in mind that the list is not, in any sense, complete and that behaviors will shift as conditions for fairness in particular situations are unique. For instance, the amount of financial compensation is relevant in what is seen as just action toward officials. Nevertheless, here is a list of examples of potentially just forms of collaboration from coaches toward officials.

1. Coaches will make sure that their team members are thoroughly familar with the rules of the game and aware of their responsibility to follow them. (It would be unjust to complicate the officials' already difficult job by asking them to do "remedial" work in teaching players the rules and/or enforce the purposeful breaking of rules.)

2. Coaches will instruct their team members regarding appropriate etiquette for dealing with officials. (It would be unfair to ask officials to "put up" with abusive or otherwise disrespectful behavior on the part of the players given the extent of their compensation.)

3. Coaches will inform officials of any local conditions of facilities, court or field toward the end of facilitating their work. (It would be unfair to impede the officials' work through neglect on this matter.)

4. Coaches will act in respectful and restrained ways toward officials. (Same as #2)

5. Coaches will honor all tenets of fairness as described by the letter of the rulebook and genuinely support the efforts of officials in this regard. (It would be unfair to officials to purposely subvert their efforts to assure equality of opportunity between opposing teams or individuals.)

6. Coaches will treat officials respectfully after contests, thank them for work done which fostered fairness and, if serious errors were made, give constructive criticism out of a concern for the officials' improvement.

Such behavior on the part of coaches is collaborative in the sense of being sane, just, appropriately respectful, grounded on a balance between rewards and expenditures. Surely, it is right to collaborate in these basic ways.

But there can be a second value which is attached to the first. Coaches could act justly toward officials under most circumstances, save those which are particularly pressure-packed for the team or of great significance for personal gains. There are many coaches who, under average circumstances, treat officials decently in some of the ways mentioned above. Yet, when emotions rise, such respect vanishes.

It would seem then, particularly since coaching is often an emtion-filled experience, that a willingness to keep promises is an important complementary value to that of a sensitivity for justice. Making a promise to uphold a sense of justice itself adds "height" to coaches' moral stature. Regardless of a potential for personal gain, regardless of the "heat" of the fray, regardless of the anger or disappointment felt toward officials,

just actions can be counted on. The just coaches who are also faithful or constant in that orientation are morally superior to those who have a base-level sense of justice but lack the capacity to make and keep promises.

If only most coaches could genuinely hold to and act upon the guidelines of this first level of morality, what a fine atmosphere for the development and play of youth and adults we would have! But there is more, yet a higher level of moral behavior toward officials.

Morally Right Treatment of Officials: Approach #2

The sentiment which underpins the finer way of treating officials provokes coaches to ask: Are there any ways in which I can make the officials' jobs a delight, not just agreeable? Is it possible to provide officials with returns that are lavish, not simply fair? Is it possible to collaborate with officials not only on terms of what they are due, but also on the basis of what they are not due--in a positive way?

This extreme height of moral stature flourishes best under conditions of potential personal gain or duress. Thus, it includes the commitment to keep promises. Its strength is greatest where those of less moral fiber break their agreements, become selfish or are driven by emotion. Height in moral sensitivity is shown at the unexpected times, when prudence and justice would not require action. Coaches with the highest moral commitment look for the optional, the unusual.

Such high-minded coaches might be observed doing some of the following:

1. Coaches will refuse to utilize tactics which are not within the letter and the spirit of the rules. They use a standard of fairness which even officials are not bound to uphold. (Coaches know that officials are concerned with maintaining utter equality of opportunity between opposing sides and also that such equality is only roughly assured by the following, in a literal way, the written rules. Thus coaches can go beyond what even the officials can

formally regulate, by adhering to a principle of fairness. These coaches show--or can show--a high level of respect for officials by not purposely putting them in an untenable position--i.e. one in which all parties know that tenets of fairness are being violated but one where the officials charged with maintaining fairness can do nothing about it.)

2. Coaches will provide for the officials' pre and post game needs as carefully as for the needs of visiting teams or any guest. Graciousness can be shown officials in any number of ways--from providing good locker room facilities to giving them a warm welcome to the school.

3. Coaches will show pleasure (during a contest) with any "good calls" (those which serve the ends of fairness), whether or not they favor their teams.

4. Coaches will take care to publicly commend officials for excellent work, whenever appropriate. This would be a particularly gracious gesture after a defeat, but would be high-minded whenever good officiating is done.

5. Coaches will encourage their players tc assist officials with their calls where this will not lead to their embarrassment nor impugn their authority. It is interesting to note here that some sport rulebooks even make provision for such fine behavior. For example in the Handbook for Umpires of the International Table Tennis Federation, section "C--2--b" reads, in part, ". . . if both players believe that an error has been made in the score and the umpire is not absolutely certain that it is correct, he (the umpire) would not be wrong to accept a correction proposed by the players." (4:26) This, of course, is an extreme way of showing concern for officials, as well as opponents.

If Hartmann (and I rather closely follow this lead) is correct in his claim that different levels of moral height can be distinguished, and if I have found two sets of values which differ on the basis of height, it should be somewhat clear that, while both ways of behaving toward officials are morally good, one is superior to the other.

Hartmann himself felt that justice, while important, was a lower-order value than say, a loving concern for others. Justice is "concerned" with basic liberties, rights and securities of persons. Justice is conservative, indicating points beyond which fair people do not transgress. It outlines minimal conditions of human rights. As Hartmann put it, "Justice is the minimum of morality that paves the way for all the higher forms." (3:232)

Indeed, the more noble way of treating officials outlined in this paper stands on a foundation of justice. The very high-mined coaches would contradict their ultimate purposes were they to fastidiously support officials by following the letter and spirit of the rules while, at the same time, forget a basic tenet of justice in their treatment of these people.

But it should be equally clear that this higher concern for officials goes beyond the requirements of justice. Where justice indicates that "enough has been done," a greater concern shows that more yet is available. Justice reflects decency. But by going beyond justice, more than the minimal rights of others can be met.

Let me conclude by discussing the group of traits which may cluster around those coaches who are able to follow the more taxing ethic. As a group, they pursue the "uncommon end." (3:196) Where some mentors are willing to settle well within the norm of current coaching ethics, these individuals cannot be so satisfied. Further, they have a capacity to discriminate between that which will be good for others and that which will be better or best. (3:197) Sometimes these coaches will fall into conflict with lesser but still basically just managers. Exemplary coaches' actions can be taken as a threat by others or, at minimum, a nettlesome ideal in a world which generally does not display human interactions at this level. (3:198) Furthermore, these coaches will not compromise their values, regardless of the circumstances. (3:201) They oppose the narrow and petty. They will not be pulled down by personal jealousies or local animosities. (3:201) And finally, these coaches are quite vulnerable. They stand out from the crowd of coaches in such a completely exposed way. (3:202)

I must confess that I rarely, if ever, achieve this level of moral rightness and know of very few coaches who do. But I am confident that there are a number among our ranks who already are "there," and am sure that others will follow.

But a word of direction for the rest of us--When we meet one of these coaches, we should not ridicule, not impede their actions by any selfish reactions of our own. We should honor such individuals, even as we honor our athletes when they display excellent skill. Is it not curious that our society will honor, reward, make rich for life an individual who displays uncommon ability in athletic performance, but frequently label those who display uncommon moral traits as "unrealistic," "prudes," "pansies," or "people who just don't know what it's all about!" But they too should be honored. Three cheers for our great athletes and our great moral leaders!

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